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THE POSITION OF THE XINJIANG UYGHUR DAP IN UYGHUR CULTURE

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Abstract

This article discusses the position, role, and significance of the Xinjiang Uyghur Dap frame drum in the performance of Uyghur Muqam as one of its primary instruments. The multifaceted functions of the Dap across various spheres, including folk songs, Muqam performances, dance displays, and social rituals, interact and complement one another, shaping the rich and distinctive soundscape of Uyghur culture.

Keyword: *music, culture, instrument, vibrate, performance, rhythm, muqam, uyghur folk song*

The Xinjiang Uyghur Dap, as a symbolic musical instrument of Uyghur musical culture, plays a versatile and crucial role in artistic practice and social life. “The Dap belongs to the membranophone category (instruments that produce sound via a vibrating membrane or skin). Its playing method involves striking with the hand, similar to instruments such as the Tabla, Djembe, Conga, Bongo, Tombek, and Darbuka”, writes Wang Yidong. “Several Central Asian countries (e.g., Uzbekistan), West Asian nations, and certain Eastern European countries also possess their own hand drums, which are similar in shape and playing technique. To distinguish between various hand-struck membranophones, particularly hand drums from different regions, we refer to it as the ‘Xinjiang Dap’ (Dap)” (Wang Yidong, 1). In Uyghur performance practice, the Dap was “called ‘Tumruk’ in ancient times” (Safar Yusayin, Muhammadtursun Ibrahim, 218). This Dap, with its unique timbre and rich ex-

pressiveness, permeates every layer of Uyghur culture, serving as a vital cultural bridge between tradition and modernity, individual and community, and art and life. The Dap is not merely a medium for musical performance but also a carrier of cultural heritage across generations. Through its distinctive performance techniques and artistic expression, it profoundly influences the spiritual world and daily life of the Uyghur people. In performance practice, it has become a significant symbol of uniqueness as an exemplar of national cultural heritage. In Uyghur culture, the Dap is not just a musical instrument but an inseparable part of the entire life process. Each of its beats reflects the heartbeat, life rhythm, and cultural memory of the people. Through the sounds of the Dap, the Uyghur people express their joys and sorrows, hopes, and dreams. This instrument signifies more than just a musical medium—it is a living expression of national identity, historical continuity, and cultural

distinctiveness. “According to historical sources, the Dap was originally made from a sheep’s skin. The Dap made from a sheep’s skin produced the musical rhythm for the dumbek (drum). The book “Memoranda on the Dap and Dumbek” states that the Dap is ‘the leader of the eight musics; without it, music cannot exist,’ and mentions that it evolved from the Qademi Kusen (Kucho)” (Abdushukur Muhammademin. 1980, 49).

In the heritage and performance of Uyghur folk songs, the Dap transcends its simple function of providing rhythmic accompaniment. The folk songs of different regions exhibit unique Dap performance styles. These differences have become an important indicator of regional musical culture. During performance and direct improvisation, an interactive artistic relationship develops between the Dap player and the singer. This is not mere following but a process of mutual inspiration and the creation of a performance with a unique style. The Dap player immediately adjusts the rhythmic treatment according to the singer’s emotional changes. The singer, in turn, draws inspiration for singing from the charm of the melodic variations. Such elevated artistic dialogue enriches each performance with unique artistic and aesthetic possibilities. The rhythmic variations of the Dap are closely linked to the emotional expression of folk songs, interpreting different moods in various musical contexts and endowing the songs with rich expressive aspects. In Uyghur folk songs, the role of the Dap is not limited to providing rhythm; it also creates specific rhythmic patterns that correspond to the content and emotional tone of each song. This requires the Dap performer to deeply understand the song’s meaning and possess the skill to find appropriate rhythmic solutions. The distinct Dap performance style of each region is a musical expression of local cultural characteristics.

Within the classical Muqam musical system, the Dap fulfills a vital structural function. A complete performance of Uyghur Muqam typically lasts about two hours. A Muqam cycle performed as a suite comprises three main parts: “Chong Naghma”, “Dastan” and “Mashrap”. The transitions between them and their proportional interconnection depend entirely on the rhythmic

guidance of the Dap. Typically, this guiding role manifests at several levels: at the macro level, the Dap marks the beginning and end of different sections, ensuring the internal logic and coherence of the two-hour musical process. At the larger cycle level, the Dap promotes the gradual ascent and development of musical mood within each part. In specific performance practice, the Dap player must accurately master dozens of traditional rhythmic patterns (*usul*). These rhythmic types change lawfully according to the needs of the musical phrases. In the “Chong Naghma” part of the Muqam, the Dap uses solemn, tranquil rhythmic patterns to create a stable foundation for the recitation of classical poetry. Upon entering the subsequent “Dastan” part, the rhythmic patterns shift to a smooth, lyrical style to reflect narrative songs. In the “Mashrap” part of the Muqam, the Dap employs passionate rhythms to showcase the climax of the music. The improvisational sections within the Muqam are particularly noteworthy. In these sections, the Dap forms complex dialogic relationships with other instruments. The Dap player must adhere to the traditional rhythmic framework. Furthermore, through creative engagement, they must demonstrate subtle rhythmic variations and interactions and competitions with melodic instruments, showcasing a high level of artistic wisdom. This artistic method, which seeks free expression within a strict framework, not only reflects the performer’s personal talent but also embodies the profound aesthetic perspectives of Uyghur musical culture in balancing tradition and innovation, rule and freedom. The use of the Dap in Muqam performance represents not only the demonstration of skill but also reflects cultural understanding and artistic cultivation; each beat embodies rich cultural content and historical memories. Within the Muqam system, the Dap is not merely a rhythm-providing instrument but a central pillar of the entire musical structure. It creates a rhythmic atmosphere suitable for the content and spirit of each part. In the “Chong Naghma” part, the stable and serene rhythms of the Dap highlight the profound meaning of philosophical poetry. In the “Dastan” part, the variability of the rhythms reflects the dramatic development of the narrative. In the

“Mashrap” part, the accelerating and intensifying rhythms of the Dap express the rising festive mood. The harmony of these three parts is impossible without masterful Dap performance.

In the field of dance art, the Dap and dance performance have formed an interdependent relationship. In the process of creating and performing Uyghur dances, dance and percussion demonstrate an interactive relationship. Choreographers design dance movements and group formations based on specific percussion rhythms. The Dap player, in turn, reprocesses the rhythms and adjusts the performance style according to the dance sequence. This two-way creative process organically integrates dance and music. In group dance, the Dap’s rhythm provides dancers with a unified rhythmic foundation. Dancers adjust the speed and intensity of their movements according to changes in the percussion, creating a coordinated performance effect. The Dap dance, as an important form of Uyghur dance, reflects the high-level integration of dance and music, where dancers and Dap players create variable and harmonious artistic effects through close collaboration. Using the Dap in dance not only enhances the performance’s rhythmic feel and visual impact but also conveys deep emotional and cultural information through the perfect harmony of percussion and movement. In professional classical dance training, the Dap is an indispensable teaching tool that helps dancers master rhythmic sense and movement coordination. In Uyghur dance art, a complex artistic relationship exists between the Dap and the dancer. The Dap is not only the rhythmic foundation of the dance but also its emotional spirit. Each dancer listens to the sound of the Dap and modifies movements accordingly based on its rhythmic changes. In this process, a lively artistic dialogue emerges between the Dap player and the dancer. The dancer’s movement responds to the Dap’s sound, while the Dap adapts to the dancer’s movements, creating new rhythmic patterns. This interaction ensures the vitality and uniqueness of the dance. In different types of Uyghur dances, the position and function of the Dap vary.

To understand the relationship between the Dap and dance more profoundly, it is nec-

essary to analyze its triple role as “commander, spirit, and interlocutor”. The Dap is the absolute commander of the dance—each of its beats instructs dancers on how to move. The acceleration or deceleration, intensification or softening of the rhythms alters the entire direction of the dance. But this command is not merely an order; it is a creative collaboration. The Dap is the spirit of the dance—its sound imbues the dance with spirituality and emotion. Each different Dap sound expresses different moods of the dance: joy, sorrow, anger, love. The Dap is the interlocutor of the dance—it is a constant dialogue between these two arts. The dancer responds to the Dap, and the Dap responds to the dancer. This dialogue is based on improvisation, making each performance unique. These relationships are particularly evident in traditional “Mashrap” ceremonies. In the Mashrap, the Dap is not only the musical accompaniment but also the organizer and director of the entire event.

“The Xinjiang Dap (Dap) features a circular frame made from mulberry or walnut wood, with a diameter of 20–50 centimeters and a height of 5–6 centimeters. The frame surface is painted with floral patterns or inlaid with bone-carved national motifs. Small brass and iron rings are placed inside the frame. It is covered with sheepskin, cowhide, donkey skin, or boa snake skin, presenting a very beautiful and exquisite appearance. When played, it is struck alternately with both hands. Its sound is resonant and clear, with a wide dynamic range and diverse, flexible performance techniques, serving to highlight the theme and mood of various musical works. Depending on its region of dissemination, distinct performance styles and schools have formed. Traditional performance techniques mainly include: central sound (鼓心音), rim sound (鼓边音), palm sound (掌音), finger sound (指音), sliding sound (挫音), and flicking sound (弹音). Through these, high-low and rhythmic sounds are produced, creating a rich musical expression. It is the most frequently used percussion instrument in national dance and music ensembles, either as accompaniment or as a solo instrument” (Xinjiang Uyghur. 2012, 288).

The concept of the unity of “poetry, music, and dance”, reflected in the Uyghur artistic classic “The Twelve Muqam”, is realized

through the Dap. In the “Chong Nagma” part of the Muqam, the Dap creates a melody for poetic recitation. In this part, the steady and stable rhythms of the Dap deepen the philosophical content of the poetry. In the “Dastan” part, the Dap enriches the narrative spirit-expressing dramatic turns of the story and the emotional states of characters through rhythm. In the “Mashrap” part, the Dap propels movement, becoming the powerful conclusion of the entire artistic cycle. The harmony of these three parts is unimaginable without masterful Dap performance. The Dap is the key element that connects these three arts, granting them life and motion. Dap performance in the Muqam demands not only technical skill but also deep cultural knowledge.

In contemporary dance education, learning Dap rhythms holds a fundamental place. Dance students deeply master dance styles by memorizing traditional rhythmic patterns and internalizing them through their bodies. In this educational process, the Dap is not merely an auxiliary tool but a primary teaching instrument. Each new dancer first learns the basics of dance by listening to Dap rhythms and learning corresponding movements. Through this, they acquire not only dance technique but also the rhythmic thinking of Uyghur culture. In large-stage works, such as the historical dance drama “Zhang Qian” or the performance “Mangguluk Mashrap”, the Dap takes on new meanings and functions. In the “Zhang Qian” performance, the Dap not only accompanies the dance but also serves as a means to intensify dramatic events and reveal the inner feelings of characters. In the “Mangguluk Mashrap” performance, the Dap becomes a symbolic expression of traditional motifs, creating new artistic means of expression in harmony with modern choreography. These performances show that the Dap’s traditional functions are preserved while being adapted to modern stage demands. This is proof that the traditional “Dap-dance” relationship continues in new forms and does not lose its significance in a modern context. The Dap, “that is, in national large, medium, and small ensembles of various forms, it is also indispensable. In medium and small national ensembles, it plays a leading role

in starting the music, providing rhythm, and coordinating the ensemble. At the same time, it holds significant importance in determining aspects such as the performance tempo, mood, and other facets of the music” (Zhou Qingbao).

From the perspective of cultural heritage, the process of teaching and learning Dap performance skills is itself an important method of transmitting cultural memory. The traditional master-apprentice transmission method teaches not only performance skills but also conveys historical knowledge related to the Dap, aesthetic views, and methods of emotional expression. While learning Dap playing skills, the younger generation is also influenced by national culture and develops a sense of identity and pride in their own national culture. In recent years, as intangible cultural heritage preservation work has deepened, the inheritance of Dap art has gained more institutional guarantees.

In conclusion, the Xinjiang Uyghur Dap of China has established a comprehensive system of artistic expression within Uyghur culture. Its multifaceted functions in various spheres such as folk songs, Muqam performances, dance displays, and social rituals interact and complement each other, shaping the rich and unique soundscape of Uyghur culture. Dap art is a vital part of the Uyghur people’s cultural identity; it is not confined to music and dance but influences all facets of Uyghur life. In Uyghur culture, the Dap is not merely a musical instrument but a symbol of spirituality, creativity, and community spirit. The future of the Dap lies in the harmonious combination of tradition and innovation. While learning traditional techniques, new generations of performers should apply modern creative methods to elevate Dap art to new heights. At the same time, through the study and promotion of Dap art, the rich heritage of Uyghur culture can be introduced to the world, cultural diversity respected, and cultural exchange developed. Dap art is a precious cultural treasure not only of the Uyghur people but of the entire Chinese nation, and protecting and developing it is our shared responsibility. As a living witness to traditional culture and a creator of future culture, the Uyghur Dap continues to fulfill its remarkable historical mission.

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